



STORYTELLING WITH DATA

Data Story Model

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STORYTELLING WITH DATA MODEL

The Storytelling with Data Model is a structured approach designed to guide storytellers in transforming quantitative data into compelling narratives. This model is a comprehensive framework for effectively communicating complex information, making it accessible, engaging, and meaningful to diverse audiences.

The model bridges the gap between raw data and the stories these numbers can tell, offering a pathway to highlight the significance, implications, and human dimensions of data.

The model includes the following components:

Component	Overview
Intent	Identify the purpose and objectives of the narrative.
Contextualization	Position the data within a broader context to underscore its relevance.
Humanization	Connect the data to real-life human experiences to foster empathy and engagement.
Simplification	Distill complex data into clear, understandable insights.
Narrative Structure	Organize the data and insights into a coherent, engaging story.
Engagement	Encourage audience interaction with and reflection on the data story.
Visualization	Employ visual aids to enhance comprehension and retention of the data insights.

Using this model involves components that storytellers should include to ensure their data-supported narratives are as impactful as possible.

INTENT

Objective

Establish the foundational goal driving the narrative.

Description

This initial step involves a deep introspection about the ultimate purpose of the data story. Is the intent to shed light on a pressing issue, argue for a specific course of action, or perhaps inspire change in behavior or perception? Understanding the intent sets the stage for all subsequent steps, guiding the choice of data, narrative style, and presentation methods.

Strategy

Establish what you want to achieve with the data story—to inform, persuade, or inspire action.

Contribution to the Story

Intent defines the core purpose and goals of the narrative. Identifying the intent ensures the story aligns with the needs and interests of the target audience, making it relevant and impactful. It sets the direction for the narrative, focusing on what the storyteller wishes to achieve, whether it's to inform, persuade, or inspire action.

Key Questions

- What specific issue does the data story address?
- How does the story align with the values or interests of the target audience?
- What outcomes (i.e., changes in thoughts, emotions, or actions) do we want to evoke in the audience through this story?
- Are there any biases or assumptions we should be aware of or address in our approach?
- How will we measure the success or impact of our story?

Action Steps

1. Clearly define the story's objective based on the intended impact on the audience.

2. Conduct audience analysis to align the story's focus with their interests and needs.
3. Select a central message or insight that embodies the story's core value proposition to the audience.

More About Intent

You can use this list of questions to uncover and articulate their story's intent. Each question is accompanied by a rationale explaining its significance.

1. "What inspired you to share this story?"

Rationale: This question helps to uncover the initial spark or motivation behind the client's desire to tell their story. Understanding this can reveal the deeper purpose or intent behind their narrative.

2. "What do you hope your audience will feel or learn from your story?"

Rationale: This question clarifies the emotional or educational impact the client wishes to have on their audience, which is a significant aspect of the storyteller's intent.

3. "Who is your intended audience, and why do you think this story will resonate with them?"

Rationale: Identifying the audience helps tailor the story to ensure it is relevant and engaging. Understanding why the story might resonate with the audience can further refine the storyteller's intent.

4. "What key messages or themes do you want to convey through your story?"

Rationale: This question helps the client focus on the central themes or messages they want to communicate, which are crucial components of the storyteller's intent.

5. "Are there any actions or changes you hope to inspire with your story?"

Rationale: This question helps you understand if the client's story has a call to action or seeks to inspire change, which is often a powerful element of the storyteller's intent.

6. "How does this story reflect your values or beliefs?"

Rationale: This question helps to align the story with the client's personal values or beliefs, ensuring authenticity and a deeper connection with the storyteller's intent.

7. "What do you think makes your story unique or different?"

Rationale: Understanding what the client perceives as unique about their story can reveal insights into their perspective and intent and can help in differentiating their narrative.

8. "How do you want your audience to view you or the subject of your story?"

Rationale: This question helps understand the client's desired perception, which is key to how they intend the story to be received and interpreted.

9. "Are there any ethical considerations or potential impacts of your story that concern you?"

Rationale: This question addresses the responsibility of storytelling, ensuring that the client's intent is ethically sound and considers the potential impact on the audience.

10. "In what ways do you see this story contributing to your personal or professional growth?"

Rationale: This question helps to link the storytelling process to the client's own development, an aspect that can significantly shape the storyteller's intent.

Building an Intent Statement

Use the answers to the questions above to complete the table, which consists of the intent statement's building blocks.

Category	Prompt	Answer
Objective	"My intent for this story is to..."	
Theme and Message	"I'm trying to convey the message that..."	
Audience Focus	"I'm crafting this story for..."	
Emotional Outcome	"I intend to make the audience feel..."	
Connection to Audience	"I intend to connect with my audience by..."	
Call to Action	"The purpose of my story is to motivate others to..."	

The final intent statement may be a paragraph like the one written below:

My intent for this story is **[Objective]**. The central theme of my story is **[Theme]**, and I want to convey the message that **[Message]**. I hope to achieve this by influencing **[Audience Focus]** to feel **[Emotional Outcome]**. To help accomplish this, I will establish a connection with my audience by **[Connection to Audience]**. At the end of my story, I want my audience to take action by **[Call to Action]**.

Examples:

- "My intent for this story is to **educate and raise awareness**. The central theme of my story is **environmental conservation**, and I want to convey the **message that every individual can make a difference**. I hope to achieve this by influencing **my community** to feel **responsible and informed**. To help accomplish this, I will establish a connection with my audience by **providing factual insights and practical tips**. At the end of

my story, I want my audience to take action by **adopting eco-friendly practices.**"

- "My intent for this story is to **motivate personal growth**. The central theme of my story is **self-discovery**, and I want to convey the message **that embracing change can lead to fulfillment**. I hope to achieve this by **influencing individuals seeking transformation** to feel **inspired and determined**. To help accomplish this, I will establish a connection with my audience by **sharing my journey of self-improvement**. At the end of my story, I want my audience to take action by **embarking on their paths of self-discovery.**"
- "My intent for this story is to **advocate for social justice**. The central theme of my story is **equality**, and I want to convey the message **that systemic change is needed**. I hope to achieve this by influencing **policymakers and activists** to feel **committed and empowered**. To help accomplish this, I will establish a connection with my audience by **sharing real-life stories of injustice**. At the end of my story, I want my audience to take action by **supporting equitable policies and advocating for change.**"

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Objective

Situate the data within a broader narrative framework.

Description

Contextualization involves explaining a backdrop that connects the data to a larger story, making it relevant and meaningful. It's about answering the "So what?" question for the audience, demonstrating why the data matters in the grand scheme of things—societal, economic, or environmental implications.

Strategy

Expose the broader implications of the data, connecting numbers to real-world impacts.

Key Questions

- What historical or cultural background is relevant to understanding this data?
- How does this data connect to larger trends or patterns in the field or society?
- What are the potential future implications of this data for the audience or the subject matter?
- Are there any counterintuitive or surprising aspects in the data that need explanation?
- How can we frame the data story to make it most compelling for our specific audience?

Action Steps

1. Frame the data story within a relevant and compelling theme.
2. Highlight the significance of the data in addressing current or future challenges.
3. Provide necessary background information to enrich the audience's understanding and appreciation of the data.

Examples of Contextualization

Example 1: Adoption of Microlearning Platforms

In recent years, as work has moved online and technology has changed quickly, there's been a big jump in companies using short, online learning sessions, known as microlearning. This approach fits learning into busy schedules and helps employees remember information better. It's become more popular because it matches the fast pace of today's work life, offering a flexible way to keep up with the latest skills and technology trends. Microlearning is a response to the need for ongoing professional development in a way that traditional, longer training sessions can't meet.

Example 2: Impact of Leadership Development Programs on Employee Retention

Companies that teach their leaders how to be better managers see more employees stick around. Good leaders make a work environment where people feel valued, supported, and excited about growth opportunities. When employees think about leaving for a new job, it's often not just about

pay but about looking for places to learn and grow. Keeping employees happy and reducing turnover is crucial for a company's success, and investing in leadership training is an intelligent way to do this. It shows how developing strong leaders is directly linked to keeping top talent.

Example 3: Role of Gamification in Enhancing Learning Engagement

Gamification, or adding game-like elements to learning, has proven to make online courses more engaging, with more people finishing them than traditional courses. Learners stay interested and motivated by turning learning into a fun activity with points, badges, and competitions. This approach is especially practical in virtual learning environments, where keeping learners' attention can be challenging. Gamification taps into the natural desire for competition and achievement, making the learning process educational, enjoyable, and engaging.

HUMANIZATION

Objective

Bridge the gap between data and human experience.

Description

This step brings the data to life by linking it to real-world human stories. It's about showcasing how numbers reflect lived experiences, affecting decisions, opportunities, and challenges individuals or communities face. Humanization fosters empathy, making the abstract tangible and the impersonal personal.

Strategy

Share narratives of individuals or communities that embody the data trends.

Key Questions

- Who are the specific individuals or communities whose stories exemplify the data trends?
- What challenges or successes have people experienced because of the trends or changes highlighted by the data?
- How can we ethically and respectfully tell these human stories?
- Are there opportunities to include direct quotes, testimonials, or narratives from the people behind the data?
- How do these personal stories reflect broader societal issues or themes?

Action Steps

1. Identify and share stories of individuals or groups represented by the data.
2. Illustrate the practical impact of data trends on daily life and societal norms.
3. Employ narratives that evoke emotional connections, making the data relatable and memorable.

SIMPLIFICATION

Objective

Make complex data accessible and understandable.

Description

Simplification is the art of distilling intricate data into its essence, ensuring clarity without oversimplification. It involves translating technical data points and jargon into language and concepts easily grasped by a general audience. This step is crucial for broadening the data story's appeal and ensuring inclusivity.

Strategy

Break down the data into simple, clear insights without losing depth.

Key Questions

- What is the minimum amount of data necessary to convey the story effectively?

- How can we use rhetorical devices (i.e., analogies, metaphors) to make complex data more relatable and persuasive?
- What key takeaways do we want the audience to remember, and how can we emphasize them?
- How can we ensure that our simplification does not misrepresent or oversimplify the data's nuances?
- Are there any industry-specific terms or concepts that need to be simplified for this audience?

Action Steps

1. Break down data into key insights and takeaway messages.
2. Use simple, clear language to describe data findings and their implications.
3. Avoid or explain necessary technical terms to ensure accessibility for all audience members.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Objective

Construct a compelling and logical data-driven storyline.

Description

This involves organizing the presentation of data into a coherent narrative arc that captures and holds the audience's attention. A well-structured narrative guides the audience through the journey of discovery, from presenting a problem or question to exploring data-driven insights and culminating in a resolution or call to action.

Strategy

Craft a story with a beginning, middle, and end, embedding data insights throughout.

Key Questions

- How can we structure the story to build tension or interest leading up to the key insights?

- What narrative techniques (e.g., storytelling arcs, characters, conflict) can we employ to make the data story more engaging?
- How do we ensure the story flows logically from the introduction to the conclusion?
- Can we incorporate a climax or a pivotal moment highlighting the most critical data insight?
- How does the narrative structure help reinforce the story's intent and key message?

Action Steps

1. Outline a storyline that follows a logical sequence—introduction, development, climax, and conclusion.
2. Integrate data insights seamlessly into the narrative, ensuring they propel the story forward.
3. Craft a conclusion that ties back to the initial problem or question, providing closure or prompting further reflection.

ENGAGEMENT

Objective

Foster active participation and deeper reflection.

Description

Engagement involves designing the data story to invite the audience to interact with the narrative. This might include prompting personal reflection, encouraging discussions, or suggesting actionable steps. Engaging stories inform and inspire readers to think more deeply or take specific actions based on the insights presented.

Strategy

Engage the audience with thought-provoking questions or calls to action.

Key Questions

- How can we incorporate interactive elements (e.g., quizzes, polls, interactive visuals) to engage the audience?

- What specific questions can we ask to prompt reflection or discussion among the audience?
- How can we create a sense of community or shared experience around the data story?
- Are there calls to action that we can include to encourage audience participation or advocacy?
- How can we facilitate feedback or dialogue with the audience about the data story?

Action Steps

1. Pose thought-provoking questions that relate the data to the audience's experiences or challenges.
2. Offer clear, actionable recommendations or suggestions for further inquiry.
3. Include interactive elements or resources for those interested in exploring the topic more deeply.

VISUALIZATION

Objective

Enhance narrative impact with visual data representation.

Description

The final step involves using visual elements such as charts, graphs, and infographics to complement and amplify the narrative. Effective visualization makes complex data more intuitive, highlights key trends or relationships, and supports the story's main messages. This step is about choosing the right visual tools to make the data story more engaging more memorable.

Strategy

Utilize charts, graphs, and infographics to illustrate key points and trends.

Key Questions

- What visual storytelling techniques can we use to strengthen the narrative and key messages?
- How can we ensure diversity in our visualizations to add interest?

- What color schemes, layouts, and design elements can we use to make the visualizations more effective and accessible?
- How can we use annotations, labels, and storytelling elements within visualizations to guide the audience's understanding?
- Are there opportunities to use novel or innovative visualization techniques that enhance the storytelling without compromising clarity?

Action Steps

1. Select visual formats that best represent the key data points and narrative needs.
2. Design visuals that are clear, accessible, and aesthetically aligned with the story's tone.
3. Ensure visualizations serve to clarify and emphasize the narrative, rather than distract or overwhelm.

More On Visualization

Use this table to understand how each category of story can be supported through specific types of data visualization, especially within the context of Learning and Development (L&D).

Category	Prompt	L&D Example
Stories of Comparison	When your narrative involves comparing elements, such as the performance of different products or satisfaction levels across services, bar charts and pie charts are your go-to. These visuals can quickly show differences or similarities that are central to your story.	Suppose you're evaluating the effectiveness of different training methods (e.g., e-learning) on employee performance. A bar chart could compare post-training assessment scores across these methods, clearly showing which method leads to higher performance. Alternatively, a pie chart could illustrate the proportion of employees who prefer each training method, offering insights into learner satisfaction.

Category	Prompt	L&D Example
Stories of Change Over Time	If you're telling a story about how things have evolved like a company's growth, line charts and area charts effectively showcase trends and changes, drawing your audience into the narrative of progress or decline.	To illustrate the improvement in employee skill levels over time, a line chart could track average assessment scores before and after several training interventions. This visual storytelling approach can highlight the positive impact of continuous learning on employee capabilities.
Stories of Relationships	When your story revolves around the connection between different variables, like the relationship between advertising spend and sales or the impact of study time on exam scores, scatter plots reveal correlations and patterns, making the relationships in your data clear and compelling.	Investigating the relationship between the number of training hours completed and employee productivity, a scatter plot might reveal a correlation, helping stakeholders understand the benefits of investing in L&D programs.
Stories of Distribution	To explore and narrate the distribution of your data, such as the range of test scores or income levels across a population, histograms help uncover the underlying patterns and outliers in your data, providing depth to your story.	A histogram could show the distribution of training completion times across a cohort of employees. This visualization might uncover patterns, such as a common range of time it takes most employees to complete a course, which can inform the design of future training modules.
Geographic Stories	When location is a key character in your story, illustrating	If your organization operates in multiple locations, a map could

Category	Prompt	L&D Example
	differences or highlights across regions, maps transport your audience to the places in question, making the data relatable and visually engaging.	highlight the participation rates in L&D programs across different regions. This could uncover geographical trends in learning engagement, helping to tailor programs to regional preferences.
Stories of Composition and Parts of a Whole	To discuss how different segments contribute to a total, like market share or budget allocations, stacked bar charts and donut charts break down the whole into understandable parts, showing how each contributes to the sum of your story.	A stacked bar chart might be used to break down the overall L&D budget by category (e.g., materials, technology, facilitators) across different programs. This provides a clear picture of where resources are being allocated. Similarly, a donut chart could represent the percentage of employees participating in each type of training program, illustrating the composition of L&D engagement.
Process or Sequential Stories	When your narrative includes a sequence of actions or steps, such as a customer journey or a project timeline, flow charts guide your audience through the process, clarifying the sequence and its importance.	To describe the onboarding process for new hires, a flow chart can map out each step of the journey, from orientation to role-specific training. This visual tool helps both learners and managers understand the sequence of learning events and expectations.